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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed how freshman composition students handled an assignment that forced them to perform an act of sophisticated literacy which was a variation between spontaneity (present) and repetition (past) with a focus on how novice writers borrow language, whether through quotation or misquotation. The assignment involved two masterpieces of American rhetoric; Nicholas Street's "The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness and Thereby Impeding Their Entrance into Canaan's Rest," written in 1777, and Henry Ward Beecher's "The Battle Set in Array," written in 1861, just days after the bombing of Fort Sumter. Rhetorically these two examples of words that worked, are carried out by the preachers' use of the Exodus theme of the Old Testament. The preachers succeeded in their task through an artful mixing of Biblical language with the language of their times. Subjects, freshman composition students, were asked to do a number of writings based on these two sermons. Their main assignment was to write a paper detailing and evaluating how one of these two preachers drew analogies back to the Exodus theme and the likely success such an analogy would have in impelling congregants to political action. Results showed that students tended to use half-borrowings of words, overuse quotations and quotation marks, and waver in point of view. (RAE)

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Borrowing Language

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0.1 Introduction

A sophisticated literacy requires the ability to take part freely in discussions that have already begun. It requires an ability not only to have and to write original ideas but also to borrow and to write the ideas of others. Language activity is "a variation between spontaneity (present) and repetition (past)" (Becker 215)

This talk presents an analysis of how freshman composition students handle an assignment that forces them to perform just such an an act of literacy.

The assignment involves two masterpieces of American Rhetoric. The first, written in 1777 and preached in East Haven, Connecticut was Nicholas Street's "The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness and Thereby Impeding Their Entrance Into Canaan's Rest."

The second, written is 1861, just days after the bombing of Fort Sumter and preached at Plymouth Church, Brooklyn was Henry

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Ward Beecher's "The Battle Set in Array."

Both sermons are no mealy and mouthed mealymouth reflections on the nature of some abstract divinity, but practical and urgent imploring to (redemption through) war. Words that are meant to bite into the audience, and draw drops, and then make those listeners hungry for what Beecher would call "war redder than blood."

The two pieces are examples of words that worked.

Rhetorically this feat is carried out by the preachers' use of the Exodus theme of the Old Testament. Nicholar Street and Henry Ward Beecher equate their own historical situation with the situation surrounding the Israelite's exodus from Egypt. "their sufferings and oppression under the tyrant Pharaoh, their remarkable deliverance by the hand of Moses out of the state of bondage and oppression, and their trials and murmurings in the wilderness." (Street 67)

The preachers succeeded in their task through an artful mixing of biblical language with the language of their present times, and through that mixing their congregants came to a re-vision of the past and of their present, and of how the two really did fit quite well together.

As one student put it, apparently rediscovering and exemplifying Socrates' point in Plato's Meno that knowledge and

virtue (and through them right action) comes from memory and recollection:[1]

> "The audience that Beecher was speaking to seemed to already have knowledge of what he was speaking on. Even if they didn't, Beecher sent across the feeling of knowledge where as, even if there was no knowledge in the audience in the end they would understand exactly, the point he was trying to get across."

The mixing of language of biblical and contemporary voice helped Beecher get his point across.

Students, freshman composition students, were asked to do a number of writings based on these two sermons. Their main assigment was to write a paper detailing and evaluating how one of these two preachers drew analogies back to the Exodus theme and the likely success such an analogy would have in impelling congregants to political action.

To make sense of their assignments, students, much like the original preachers, end up using language and ideas from quite distinct periods: Biblical times, Revolutionary War times, Civil War times, and their own time.

What I am interested in and what I want to consider further are the strategies of language management used by students in navigating between the language of these quite different discourse communities.

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1. Plato, Meno 81

Hence, I am interested in strategies, unconscious or conscious, of borrowing, of imitation, and so also, of originality.

A mature writing and critical thinking empowers its users with the ability to carry out sophisticated discussions, not merely with others who are comfortably closeby in time and language, but also with those far separated from us by time and by language. Though it may seem peculiar or even perverse to characterize matters this way, writing is very much a conversation with those long distant or long dead.

What though is the proper etiquette for such conversations? That is part of what a characterization of borrowing and of unconscious imitation must get at.

I am a bit unsure whether this panel is considering imitation as a conscious or unconscious working, but perhaps one way to look at my comments today is to think of these student writings as well-intentioned borrowing and not worry initially whether such well intentioned borrowing evidences malicious or benign imitation.

What I'm interested in is the way that novices borrow language, whether through quotation or misquotation. And what do make mistakes, what we might generously call their "slips of the quote" - what do these slips show us. Not only normatively as symptomatic of student illness and verbal delinquency, but also show us in a descriptive and explanatory framework about the

structure of the written language we use.

0.2 Some Novice Writings

Let me exhibit three sorts of phenomena common among novice writers: 1) free borrowing of language outside of quotational contexts, 2) hypercorrective uses of quotation marks, and 3) waverings in point of view. While all three could be viewed in a prescriptive framework as errors, they can also be viewed as attempts on the part of the students to take part in discourse communities of which they are not yet a part; in this case, the far distant communities of the Civil War, Revolutionary War and Biblical periods.

First, we see free borrowing of language outside of quotation contexts.

(1) Street states that there are many things that try us to see if we are of a public Spirit.

(2) After being in the wilderness for many years, God put the children of Israel to a number of tests, designed to cleanse thier[sic] hearts of the wickedness instilled in them by the Egyptians

(3) [Beecher] told them whenever a man is called to defend truth or principle, a church or a people, a nation or an age he

is the leader of God's people.

(4) The people of the past have yielded everything but manhood, and principle, truth, and honor.

(5) God has raised up many men, at different periods in the world, to bring forth his cause.

(6) Both of these men were put through the test of God to discover the corruption they had within their hearts.

(7) This was done to discover to themselves and others what is true in their hearts.

(8) As a result, God led them into the wilderness of the desert to humble and prove them, so they could learn what was really in their hearts.

In the previous examples anything from a single word to long stretches of discourse are borrowed. Thus, for example in (5), "raised up" is a locution that Street but not the student would natively use. Similarly for "within" in (6). Though corruption is presumably in our hears to day, it is nevertheless no longer within our hearts. (8) exhibits a much larger borrowing.

At times students give us almost a protocol of their thoughts on such borrowings, indicating the successive assimilation of the ideas of others, and moving from direct quotation to original speech:

(9) [Street] states, "God frequently brings his own people into a state of peculiar trials, to discover to them and others what there is in their hearts." We would say it today as God brings his people into a peculiar trial, or even simpilier[sic] than that. God tests you.

Note that the student found it unnecessary to quote any of the material after We would say, and this despite the fact that the language there is largely Street language of Revolutionary times.

In the examples above, students have used another's language. They know that I know that other language, for the class as a whole has spent some three or four sessions looking closely at the two speeches. Yet, they fail to be bothered by the absence of quotation marks and by the free borrowing of language. They certainly don't see themselves as cheating or as copying.

The second sort of data to be presented involves not a paucity, but an excess of quotation and quotation marks. The strategy appears one of almost hypercorrection.

First, note a tendency to quote too much and too often. As a result, we have what appears (at least on overly meticulous examination) an unsuccessful assimilating of ideas across time periods. Consider the following, slip of the quote:

(10) The British, like the Egyptian Pharohs [sic], were trying to "oppress, enslave, and destroy these American states"

In this example the student has correctly given the boundaries of the quotation. However, across these boundaries, there seems to be an unsuccesful integration of past and present. The sentence implicates that Egyptian Pharaohs are the sorts that are in a position to act upon American states.

In addition to this zealousness about quotational material, note a corresponding zealousness in use of quotation marks:

(11) Street believes that this evil of the heart shows itself in every generation, and we never know the depth of that evil until "a suitable temptation draws if forth into exercise" or as we now would say "until we are put to the test."

This latter use of quotation marks on "until we are put to the test" may seem strange. It quotes not an individual speaker who used those words at a definite time, but a more or less anonymous society that uses those words at all appropriate times.

I believe that this is a correct use of quotation.

In addition to these half-borrowings of words, and apparent overuse of quotation and quotation marks, we see a third trait of novice writers: a wavering in point of view. Novice writers tend to jump about, at times looking at matters from the comfort of their own perspective, then jumping into Street's shoes, then looking at matters from God's point of view. And throughout it all, we the readers are just a bit unsure of where they are standing.

This is especially common in the use of pronouns and other deictic markers:

(12) He[MJS-Street] says that the colonists are in the same position. We are in the wilderness and now you feel you want to go back like they felt. It was better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness. As soon as any problem arises we are ready to go back. We have distrust in God.

(13) The British wanted control of these colonies but the colonists wanted to be independent and free.

This situational indentification with the ideas (and here, the people) of another time period is particularly evident in the following sentence, written in the present progressive:

(14) Thats why George III is pushing us with all his tariffs and policies.

In a pedantic mood, I would probably write "still?" beside such a sentence.

The uncertainty a novice writer feels in situating his own comments and those of others is nicely shown in the following sentence, typed into a final draft, and then penned over at crucial points. Note the pronoun revisions:

(15) Some points of the analogy Nicolas [sic] Street was trying to make is that if he would make sense of event[revision: add plural s] that preceded him[cross out and change to us], he[cross

out and change to we] could make sense of the understandings of the Revolutionary War. He[cross out and change to we] could explain the characters of the biblical times to the characters of the Revolutionary War period.

In looking at all these three kinds of examples, recall again that students are well aware that the teacher and the other members of the class know the writings of Beecher and of Street. Why then the borrowing? The pronoun switching gives us a first clue: borrowing language, much like pronoun switching, is a way of trying to identify with another time period. It is a way of trying to walk, talk, think, and even preach like Street and Beecher. Rather than a detached objectivity, the novice writers are attempting to understand not through distancing themselves from another time and language but by more closely approaching that time and language.

To slip into a more prescriptive mode for just a moment, let me suggest that that attempted approach , an approach of a distant time and language, is a worthy endeavor. Indeed, it is very much what we are talking about when we talk about a liberal education.

Now, what would suffice to show that the student data I have presented reveal something interesting about the management of language through past and present. Much more than I have presented.

What are the next steps?

1) We would want to show that the kinds of errors shown in the student data are really representative of more systematic properties of the language, properties that exist quite independently of any perscriptive grammars, quite independently of narrow rhetorical concerns of use of quotation, indeed quite independently of written language as all. In the written version of this paper I argue that that is the case by looking at cases of underdetermination of meaning in English sentences, problems involving the scope of verbs, vagueness of verbs of saying, indeterminacy in tense and deictic markers in English. Perhaps some of this can be mentioned in the question period.

2) Secondly, we would want to show that this vagueness and indetermination in the language itself can serve a rhetorically useful purpose in inducing belief, integrating knowledge, whatever. I believe that also is the case, and present examples of manipulations of quotation and misquotation for rhetorically useful purposes.

0.3 Writing and the Regimentation of Conversation

In closing, let me escape from natural discourse to formal logic for just a moment.

In formal logics, quotation marks, one of the devices for

imitation discussed in the examples just given, are a way of indicating that words are being mentioned rather than used. They are employed when one is making reference not just to the meaning of the words but to their form.

Quotation marks, on this account, are what W.V.O. Quine might deem a regimentation of the language. That is, they are a way of taking that confusing and inconsistent natural language, English, and placing it in a form where it meanings are perspicuously represented, analyzed and connected.

Quotation marks in written ordinary language are not meant to be the same as the quotation marks in a regimented formal language. Quotation marks in written discourse, may, however, be viewed as a way of regimenting our language. A way of trying to unambiguously distinguish the language of others, from the language of ourselves, the language of repetition from the language of spontaneity, the languge of originality from the language of imitation.

Through the examples presented here of the novice writer's use of borrowed language I have attempted to avoid normative prounoucements of proper behavior in the integrating repetition and spontaneity in written language. Rather I've tried to look at the way this duet is handled by the novice, and then suggest further approaches for asking how the language itself allows that duet to be handled.

As teachers of writing, and of critical thinking, and of the liberal tradition in general, we attempt to help students carry on conversations across time. This "conversation of mankind" is carried out in our classrooms through writing. Writing itself is just a series of conventions for the representation of language. Those conventions, such as the convention of quotation marks are often seemingly abused by novice writers. However, that verbal delinquency may reveal something much deeper about the true nature of conversation and learning. As a grumpy Socrates would no doubt inform us through the Phaedrus the written record of mankind is something quite distinct from the conversation of mankind. It may be then that excessive worry about a clear dichotomy between borrowing/imitation and originality may lead only to bad conversation. And it may be that in understanding and appreciating the messiness of this dichotomy, and hence the resistance of the language to regimentation, we may eventually come to a more true creativity and literacy.

What one of my students attributed to history, may also hold true of language and our perceptions of reality through it, namely that it "repeats itself but we never really realize it until it is slapped in our faces like a rude awakening."

---The End---

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